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C O N F I D E N T I A L ISTANBUL 000383

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/08/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: ISTANBUL POLICE BRUTALITY DRAWS EU CRITICISM

Classified By: Consul General David Arnett for Reasons 1.4(b&d)

1. (c) Summary: The use of violence by Istanbul police to break up a demonstration of Turkish women on March 6 prompted widespread international press coverage and criticism from a visiting EU Troika delegation. Our human rights contacts characterized the police response as harsh and unacceptable. Startling images of the event, aired by local and international television, have raised questions about Turkey's commitment to EU reform just months before membership negotiations are set to open. Some here have even suggested that the event may have been a deliberate attempt by the police to sabotage Turkey's own EU bid. Our experience with the local police and a discussion with one of our senior police contacts suggest to us that the police crackdown may, in fact, have been ordered from above. End Summary.

2. (sbu) Istanbul police used force to break up a March 6 demonstration in the Beyazit neighborhood of central Istanbul held to mark International Women's Day. The demonstration of several hundred women was organized by groups including the Democratic Women's Movement (which appears to be the women's branch of a nascent Kurdish party with PKK elements), the Independent Revolutionist Working class Platform, the Contemporary Jurists Association and the Labor Movement Party, a radical socialist party. Riot police were captured on film breaking up the demonstration, beating women demonstrators with truncheons, and spraying them with tear and pepper gas.

3. (c) Lerzan Tascier, a board member of the Human Rights Association, told us that she believed the police intervention was harsh and unacceptable. "The police were full of hatred and they acted as if they were unleashed," she added. She maintained that the demonstration, organized by radical socialist/left-wing groups, had gathered on a legal basis to conduct a peaceful rally, and no illegal slogans were used. All 63 demonstrators detained by the police were subsequently released by the court. Meanwhile, a separate, much larger demonstration of 2,000 to 3,000 women organized by the Union of Women Laborers occurred peacefully on March 6 in the Kadikoy district of Istanbul. We know from experience that riot police generally cannot use force without direct orders. The Deputy Police Chief for Counter-Terrorism, whom we saw at the event on television and who was almost certainly one of the senior police officials responsible, professed "no knowledge" of what had transpired and nonchalantly tried to pass the buck.

4. (u) According to subsequent press reports, Turkish officials were slow and hesitant to condemn the incident. EU Enlargement Commissioner Rehn, visiting Turkey as part of an EU Troika delegation for meetings with the GOT, raised the issue with FM Gul on March 6. After the meeting, Gul told the press that the police had to act within the framework of government regulations, and said the Interior Ministry had begun the necessary procedures to investigate the incident. Following public EU criticism of the incident, Gul also condemned the police action and promised to punish those responsible for the violence. Justice Minister Cicek contradicted him, however, noting that "we need to show understanding to the police."

5. (c) Comment: Unfortunately, the violence employed by Istanbul police in this incident is far from extraordinary. A female Reuters correspondent told us, for example, that a police officer sprayed her face with pepper gas while she was covering street demonstrations at last year's NATO Summit. The fact that these demonstrators were women, the violence was captured on film, and it came just before a major EU visit all ensured that the event would be publicly condemned. At least one newspaper, Hurriyet, has already commented that the violence may have been a deliberate attempt by disgruntled police to sabotage efforts for Turkey's EU bid. Given some comments we have heard from the grumbling state bureaucracy, reports of discontent with some of the EU-imposed penal code reforms, and the duplicitous answer we received from our police contacts, we would not rule it out as a possibility.

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